

## **Interview with Ross McVean - Manager of the Prince of Wales Hotel**

### **How did you get involved in running the Prince of Wales, and what year was that?**

I went there as a manager in 1977. And then I bought the business in 1983. And I sold it in 1989. That is about 16 or 17 years (\*12 years).

\*Note by Punk Journey

### **And so, during that time you saw a lot of things change in terms of subcultures and you went through the whole punk era, which must have been an interesting time for you. So, first of all, PBS came to the Prince when you were there, is that right?**

They came probably in about 1980, (1979) and they had the back section there, next to the dressing rooms for 'Pokeys', which was a gay Sunday night that ran for 14 years, and it never got less than 1000 people. And 'Pennies', which was a lesbian disco that came along a bit later, was every alternate Saturday night, and that ran for six years, and it probably would get about 500 or 600 people.

We never had a fight in 14 years. Never even had a scuffle. Oh, one day we did, two blokes had the same frock on, and they had a bit of a scuffle, but that was about all.

### **Whose idea was Pennies and Pokeys?**

Jan Hillier, she was a leader in the gay community and a bit of an icon, and Doug Lucas. It was their idea. Doug Lucas was the compare; I took the bar and supplied some food and then I charged on the door. It was a very good show. They sent the choreographer to Las Vegas, and all the costumes were better than the 'Les Girls' shows. So, it had a really great reputation.

Some of the gay, younger gay people would bring along their parents to see part of the scene. It was just a good night.

### **So, what was having PBS up the back of the building like?**

That was good because we used to do a thing called **Soul Shakedown**, one Monday a month, for a couple of years, and it was done by Ken Fargher, who was one of the people in charge of PBS, and that used to get semi-punk, and middle of the road bands and they would get their 600 or 700 people once a month.

### **And so, having PBS at the back of the building, did that start attracting different punters to the venue?**

Well, it certainly didn't dissuade them from coming but so it was just an extra string to our bow. And it was good for the radio station because they paid a very nominal rent, and they had a terrific following.

**Because Fred Negro was saying that he started, in a sense, the punk sort of gigs at the Prince in what he called the 'Illegal Room', which was the Regal Room.**

Yeah, he was one of the ones, he had his bands The Editions, I Spit on your Gravy, The Fuck Fucks and The Band who Shot Liberty Valance, and then Michael Lynch, and Gavin Purdy were also band bookers for some of the bigger bands. But on those Thursday nights or the 'Thursday Crawl' the Ballroom put on bands, and we put on bands and the punters would just walk up and down the street and they got the bands for nothing.

**So how did that come about? Was that your idea to start putting on the bands on Thursday night and the George just followed suit? And then how did it become the notorious Thursday Crawl?**

Well, Graham Richmond, who's now deceased, was up at the Seaview with Todd Shelton, and we got together with a few other people from the music industry. And we all sort of pooled the idea, and from day one it was a success.

**Okay, so it was it was really you guys getting together and having a conversation, because you knew that the punk scene was still happening, even though it started in 1977/78 at the Ballroom, and we were now coming into the early to mid-80s, and there were still quite a lot of punks around getting more into the hardcore side of music. So, were you just taking advantage of the fact that these kids, you know, they love punk, they need a place to drink. There's not a lot of money going around, let's create something that's exciting because beers were only 20 cents a pot. So, it obviously wasn't a money-making project, and the bands were free. So, what was the aim behind it?**

As you say it was good for the kids and it was good for the pub, because there were always people there and the kids, even though they were pretty outlandish compared to my generation, though they were always well-behaved and terrific. You can have them with Spike Mohawk haircuts and a hundred things stuck through their neck and ears and nose, but 99% of them were well-behaved and good.

**So, in a sense, you can pretty much take partial credit for the fame of the Thursday crawl, which was really a huge part of a lot of punk's lives every Thursday. It's sort of infamous now. A lot of people still talk about the Thursday crawl and how great it was, and it was a huge part of their week. It was going between the Ballroom and the Prince. It was like a major outing every Thursday night. So that's fantastic, and I bet you didn't know at the time that it was going to be such a legacy.**

Well, you didn't know, like when we first opened the pub, we did it as a huge seafood restaurant. And we had a little trio, and I went up to Doyle's in Sydney and we copied their menu, it was a total disaster, and it only lasted about six months. What works in St Kilda doesn't work somewhere else. And vice versa. That was the right formula at that time, it's probably different now.

**And so over that time you would have seen all those bands like, like Depression, G.A.S.H, I Spit on Your Gravy, Civil Dissident etc. What was your opinion of the music?**

Well, alternative music. I wasn't really into that into, but some of them were good, but some of the other bigger bands that came from overseas didn't draw as many crowds as the locals. I remember, I think it was a band called \*Black Flag. And they came one Saturday and set up all these things around the stage and had about five minders and about thirty people came in.

\* Note by Punk Journey - Black Flag never toured Australia, so it must have been another band that he was thinking of. Maybe The Anti Nowhere League...

We also had big heavy metal nights too. So, it was a mixture of drag queens, punks, heavy metal, it was just a strange sort of mixture, but there was no trouble between anyone. We got some of the bands from Frank Stivala (Premier Artists) and Russell Stevens (Rockland Promotions) who had a little office too. I gave him an office to book the bands, and he booked a lot of the Thursday night bands too. I think we did about four bands and I think the Seaview would do four, so they got eight bands for nothing.

A long time ago, I had a red book with all the bookings when I used to do them, with the advice from Michael Lynch and Gavin Purdy and Russell Stevens, and Frank Stivala and everybody else, and other band people would come in and want to do benefits, but somewhat somewhere that book disappeared.

Our first band booker was Laurence J. Richards. He booked the Divinyls for two nights, we got 1100 each night (1983). We could sort of mix different types of music without being totally punk, totally gay, totally anything. It was just a strange combination.

**What was your opinion of Laurie Because, because I don't think he ever sort of really got the credit that he desired for the venues that he helped create. He made The Crystal Ballroom famous. So, there was The Tiger Lounge, The Ballroom, as well as The Electric ballroom and the Jump Club. So, he had this ability to walk into a venue and say, "right, I'm going transform this venue," or "we're going to start getting all these international bands here." "We're going to make this venue more exciting than what it is." I mean, what was your take on him in that respect?**

He was an ideas man with great creative ability. You know, it's like I said, with the Prince, sometimes things worked, and sometimes they didn't. And if they didn't work, they were the major failures and if they really worked, they were huge successes.

**And so, working with the band Booker's...Did you take their advice as to what bands are hot? And what bands are going to pull crowds? And did you just trust them and leave that up to them?**

I did. We had a few major acts, like getting back to the middle of the road stuff. Canned Heat, we paid oh, \$6000 or \$7000 for those days, and they had about 30 people. You know, I trusted them.

### **How did you advertise the gigs?**

Fred Negro used to do the handbills, and we used to put the handbills around all the venues around St Kilda; The Palais, The Palace, the Esplanade Hotel and all up the streets. And we advertised in Beat and Inpress. Rob Furst used to come in a fair bit.

And we put on a lot of different things too, we put on some big jazz acts, which didn't really work, but we brought over people like Ernestine Anderson, who was a singer from America, who was one of the greatest saxophonists the world had ever seen, and we had Ricky May, so we tried a lot of things, but that didn't really work. So, the punk thing and the gay thing, that was 100% success.

**Did you think it was an exciting time because you must have seen some outlandish things running that pub for all those years. And you're obviously an even-tempered kind of guy to be able to put up with such an outlandish mix of people - punks, drag queens metal heads, plus your generic crowd. What was your take on the whole sort of mix of so many different variable people?**

Well, the whole pub was like that too because the public bar downstairs with just your normal public bar people and the saloon bar was all gay and then upstairs we had 50 motel rooms, so most of the bands that came into town, the lesser bands would stay at the pub, and we could do a deal with them and give them their accommodation and they'd be a bit cheaper than if we were buying direct.

And there was one wing where six coppers had left their homes that are all living upstairs and there were gangsters and prostitutes, drag queens, strippers, businesspeople. And for some reason for all those years, they all got on well, and there was no trouble. Those 50 rooms were all self-contained with toilets, TVs, showers, they were pretty ahead of their time.

### **Why did you leave running the Prince of Wales?**

Well, it was a moment of greed. I got offered a large amount of money, and I've regretted it ever since to be honest. And then I went to the Tote Hotel and virtually did the same thing (1990). The Tote was only running to a very small extent, and it was closed when we bought it. But we brought in 'Rock Against Work' on a Tuesday which was free with a sausage sizzle, and we did about 500 or 600 there with the same thing, and we put the drinks up 5 or 10 cents to cover the bands, it was pretty much the same formula.